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The Cult of National Security

WHAT HAPPENED TO CHECKS & BALANCES?

Recent revelations that President George W. Bush authorized U.S. intelligence agencies to engage in domestic surveillance have revived old apprehensions about the abuse of executive power. Dark references to Watergate litter the airwaves and editorial pages. On Capitol Hill, outraged politicians vow to shield Lady Liberty from further assault. All of this is as predictable as a Pearl White serial and about as meaningful.

Railing against the imperial presidency, whether the villain is Richard Nixon or George W. Bush, mistakes the symptom for the disease. To imagine that curbing this president's inclination to spy on Americans will restore the system of checks and balances designed by the Constitution's framers makes about as much sense as thinking that occasionally skipping dessert offers a sure-fire cure for obesity. The real problem is not executive authority as such. It is the worldview that over the past several decades has spawned a perverse and antidemocratic cult of the presidency.

Put another way, the problem stems not from conspirators in the White House but from twin convictions to which virtually all members of the political elite, and much of the public, devotedly subscribe. According to the first of these convictions, the United States is a nation under siege, beset by dire threats, its very survival at risk. According to the second, only the capacity and willingness to use all of the instruments of executive and military power, instantly and without hesitation, keep our enemies at bay.

These two notions describe the essence of the national-security paradigm that has shaped U.S. policy since World War II. From the late 1940s through the 1980s, responding to the threat posed by international communism meant placing a premium on maintaining, threatening, and at times using force. From this imperative there evolved the various components of what has been called the national-security state: a large standing military establishment scattered around the world; a vast arsenal of strategic weapons kept ready for instant employment; intelligence agencies operating beyond public scrutiny in a "black world"—the entire enterprise tended by an army of devoted bureaucrats planning, managing, budgeting, and elevating group-think to a fine art. To lend a veneer of rationality to the activities of this sprawling apparatus, successive administrations devised "doctrines" with imposing names. For Truman there was "Containment"; for Eisenhower "Massive Retaliation"; for Kennedy "Flexible Response."

The Soviet threat was real and an American response was necessary, but one unanticipated consequence was that crisis became a seemingly permanent condition. With anxious



Because I said so!

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citizens looking to the commander-in-chief to keep them safe, presidents accrued—and exercised—an ever-expanding array of prerogatives. In the process, the legislative branch by and large functioned as an enabler and drifted toward irrelevance.

With the Congress deferential (if not altogether supine) on matters related to national security, politics centered increasingly on the question of who controlled the Oval Office. More often than not, the key to winning the White House lay in scaremongering, with successful candidates from Eisenhower to George H. W. Bush letting it be known that in a "dangerous world" electing their opponent was to invite the barbarians through the gates or to risk the cataclysm of World War III.

Although the cold war eventually ended, the symbiotic relationship between the national-security state and the imperial presidency did not. As the various alarms of the 1990s demonstrated, even after the Soviet Union collapsed the drumbeat of ongoing crisis continued. In the Persian Gulf and the Balkans, in Somalia and Haiti, in the Taiwan Straits, and on the Korean Peninsula, the elder Bush and Bill Clinton acted in accordance with the dictates of the established national-security paradigm. In doing so, and by no means incidentally, they sustained the freedom of presidential action that had evolved during the postwar era. If Truman could order U.S. forces into Korea, if Eisenhower could overthrow the governments of Iran and Guatemala, and if Kennedy could decide for or against nuclear war in October 1962, then surely there could be no objection to Clinton bombing Belgrade or Baghdad.

In this sense, George W. Bush's response to 9/11 did not mark some radical departure from the past. Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Bush has merely exploited the process whereby the cult of the presidency and the ideology of national security feed on one another. The essence of the Bush Doctrine promulgated in 2002 laying out the "war on